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Russia's new rocket could tilt space power balance to Soviets

By Martin Sieff
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The Soviet Union's new Energia rocket, the world's most powerful booster, could give it a commanding lead in "star wars" space-based military systems and lead to a new series of Soviet "space spectaculars," U.S. experts warn.

The 2,000-ton Energia booster blasted off into space on Friday night from the Tyaturam space complex in Kazakhstan in Soviet Central Asia, fired by what Soviet television described as the most powerful engines in the world.

The eight liquid hydrogen-powered engines are rated at 175 million horsepower, compared with the 168 million of America's Saturn V booster that put man on the Moon. Previously, the most powerful Soviet booster, the Proton, had a 60 million horsepower rating.

The official Soviet news agency Tass described Energia as a two-stage, multipurpose launch vehicle intended to put both reusable craft and large space vessels into orbit for use in science and the economy.

A Soviet television commentator, in a report from the Tyaturam complex, said Energia one day would be capable of lifting into orbit "the blocks from which cities will be built."

Said one U.S. space expert: "They have tripled their payload capacity." The Energia can carry a payload of up to 100 tons.

James Oberg, a leading U.S. expert on the Soviet space program, said: "I have some anxiety about the Soviet purpose in building such a huge rocket. None of the benign rationales appear to hold water."

"A few payloads like this would allow the Soviets to set up an orbiting battle stations system and to deny space to any payloads that did not meet with their approval," he said.

Such battle stations, he said, could be armed with lasers, small missiles, fragmentation bombs or satellite warheads.

"Only three or four Energia payloads would be enough to set up an effective anti-satellite network [in orbit]," Mr. Oberg said.

Once such a system was in orbit, Mr. Oberg said, "They can attack any satellite within a few orbits and enforce their own 'export controls' on it.

"The Soviets have been talking about pre-launch inspection of payloads through the United Nations," he said. But given Soviet influence at the United Nations, "It would be no more comfort to me if those satellites were carrying the U.N. flag" instead of the Soviet one, he said.

Mr. Oberg added: "It is impossible to overestimate the importance of the Soviet achievement. For the first time in 25 years they have resumed the lead in rocket power with the obvious intention of using it."

In the 1957-62 period, the Soviet Union launched the first orbiting satellite, Sputnik 1; the first live animal in orbit, a dog in Sputnik 2, and the first man in space and into orbit, Maj. Yuri Gagarin. They later launched the first three-man space mission and put the first woman into space, Valentina Tereshkova.

In the long run, Energia gives the Soviet Union the booster capacity to establish a permanent or semi-permanent lunar colony and to send manned expeditions to Mars and to its moons. An unmanned Soviet probe to Mars' tiny moon Phobos is to be launched next year.

The Soviets have laid stress on keeping their cosmonauts in space for long periods of time, recreating the conditions that would apply on missions to Mars, or on lunar colonies.

Western experts say Moscow has been working for at least nine years to develop a space shuttle and is expected to make its first shuttle launch this year. The Energia booster would provide a capacity to launch a shuttle at least as large as the U.S. design.

U.S. military experts have suggested the Soviet shuttle could be used for military purposes, although Moscow insists its space efforts are peaceful.

Tass mentioned military involvement in the new rocket, however, saying military experts had worked with personnel from research, design, production and assembly groups to create and test Energia and its launch complex.

The development of a giant liquid hydrogen-powered booster has been hailed by Western experts as a major achievement. The Soviets previously used other liquid chemical fuels for their space program boosters and failed in previous efforts to produce a liquid hydrogen booster.

Mr. Oberg called the Soviet achievement "impressive and disturbing." He added: "Our [liquid hydrogen] engines work, but they are based on 25 years of experience. [The Soviets] have been able to skip all that. This is evidence of either divine intervention, or their ability to use western experience.

"There is no other space nation on earth that can go from nothing to that [the Energia], he said. "It is a tribute to their rocket engineers and to the GRU [Soviet military intelligence] and the KGB."

Putting his personal stamp on the importance of the launch, Kremlin leader Mikhail Gorbachev paid a three-day visit to the Tyaturam complex last week.

During his visit to Baikonur, Mr. Gorbachev underlined the significance of defense work carried out at the center in a speech described but not fully reported by Tass.

He was accompanied to the space complex by three of the highest-ranking Soviet leaders with jobs related to military affairs, in another sign that the rocket launch and forthcoming shuttle venture could have military applications.